

The Repeal of the Corn Laws

A report of the History Group discussion meeting in February, where Professor John Vincent described the background to Peel's abolition of the protectionist Corn Laws 150 years ago; by Duncan Brack

In fact, as Professor Vincent reminded us, Peel did not in fact completely abolish the Corn Laws; the reduction of tariffs to zero had to wait for Gladstone's budget in 1870. But of such myths is history made – and given that Peel's action split the Conservative Party and ushered in almost ninety years of free trade orthodoxy, it is right to remember 1846 as the year of decision.

The Corn Laws, imposed after the Napoleonic wars, were designed to protect British agriculture from continental European competition. Although the tariffs applied to wheat and other grains raised prices, British farmers were able, by and large, to keep pace with the growth in population, so in fact wheat prices rarely exceeded 70 shillings per imperial quarter (the level at which food riots could be expected; 50 shillings was thought to be a reasonably affordable level). But the possibility of an election coinciding with a bad harvest meant that the issue of how to justify raising the price of bread was never far away – particularly for the 50% of the population who were then rural.

Foreign policy also had its impact. Britain was not entirely self-sufficient in food, and the main source of grain imports for much of the nineteenth century was the cornfields of the Ukraine and Poland, then part of Tsarist Russia. The maintenance of the Russian alliance was therefore an important object of British foreign policy, and when it failed – as it did during the Crimean War of 1853–56 – wheat prices increased to dangerous levels.

In terms of politics, the Great Reform Act of 1832 had marked an important stage in the decline of aristocratic power in Britain. The new participants in the administrative elite were the urban middle classes, who, while still not large enough in numbers to take over completely, continued their pressure on the political and economic levers of power. Richard Cobden's Anti-Corn Law League, one of the most effective pressure groups in British history, should be seen in this light. It championed the cause of free trade, drawing its supporters from commerce and manufacturing, who wanted open export markets and cheap labour (which would follow from cheap food). It was naturally opposed by the aristocratic land-owning classes.

It was against this background that Peel came to see repeal as the best way to ensure social cohesion, knitting together the best aspects of the approaches of both parties: the liberal society created by the Whigs in the 1830s and the liberal economy being constructed by the Tories in the 1840s. The fact that this largely destroyed the Conservative Party in the process was not foreseen, but may not have troubled Peel unduly.

Educated and trained entirely as a statesman, enjoying an unorthodox background as a competent Irish administrator and cold and aloof in manner, he was hardly a party man. Indeed, he had already alienated a substantial proportion of his own supporters (and helped revive the Whig/Liberal coalition) by appearing too sympathetic to Catholics in the Maynooth College issue of 1845. Failing to obtain the united support of his Cabinet, Peel effectively abandoned his own party, striking deals with the Irish and Russell's Whigs in the Commons, and Wellington's peers in the Lords, to force through repeal. But this was not an alliance which could sustain him in office; although the legislation passed through Parliament with relative ease, Peel himself was overthrown on a snap vote on Irish coercion on the very day of repeal in 1846. The Party which he had led was not to recover from this split for fifty years, while the cause of free trade became in due course the reigning orthodoxy of Victorian economics.

Professor Vincent's comprehensive talk, ranging from Disraeli's literary career to the constituency backgrounds of opponents of repeal (they were county seat holders) to Peel's political psychology, could have carried on much longer. Aply chaired by James Cameron (chair of the Party's working group on trade policy), this must rank as one of the most entertaining History Group discussion meetings.

Duncan Brack is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group. His article tracing the development of Liberal policy on free trade appeared in Newsletter 9 (December 1995).

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